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Baseball Opens in Seattle - Fantasy Baseball is Growing

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
April 11, 1996

Baseball season is here. Those of us in Florida have said good-bye to spring training, which once had the ambiance of relaxation and play, and now is a speck on the major league entertainment juggernaut. The last players have been cut, the minor leaguers no longer wear major league uniforms, some dreams are over and others soon will be. The cry of play ball has been heard across the snow covered landscape.

Two Sundays ago the traditional opener took place in Seattle where the King Dome evokes memories of seasons past, the enjoyment of the fresh air and sunshine, the emerald green of the infield glistening in springtime. You can almost touch history. Throughout the game I waited for the appearance of the Seattle Albatross, W.P. Kinsella's mascot creation, but it never descended from its nest at the pinnacle of the dome to grace the top of the dugout.

Instead we watched as tradition unfolded inside this mausoleum of poured concrete, testimony to the total emptiness of 20th century public architecture. No Green Cathedral this. Just an ill-conceived misconception adopted by local politicians who have no inkling of civic greatness. Did a vice-president from Nintendo throw out the first pitch?

The only thing missing was Acting-Commissioner-For-Life Bud Selig who chose not to bless this opener of openers, and assures us that all is well with baseball: fans are coming back, a great healing has taken place. The fans somehow managed to remove themselves from spring training games at a rate of thirty percent below that of 1994. But it doesn't matter. This is why he is Bud Lite, the trailing end of Fehr and Loathing.

And speaking of the front end, where is Donald Fehr these days? Does he spend his time calculating the difference between his leadership and Marvin Miller's? Or is he preoccupied with weightier matters such as the DH and interleague play, while he awaits the arrival of the next affront from the owners?

Indeed there is no collective bargaining agreement after all these months, and apparently neither side cares. There is a new TV contract bringing in revenue in larger sums than seemed possible a year ago, and Bud says all is well. That somehow seems enough. The new model apparently is the NFL which played on for years with no collective bargaining agreement, while

people still made money and the fans begged for more. In the meantime mother nature sends snow storm after snow storm, but no one will get the message.

What have we done to deserve all of this? Perhaps we are being punished for having accepted Fantasy League Baseball. And accept it we have. Millions of dollars are spent on entry fees to join these bogus leagues. Grown men spend hours pouring over reams of statistics preparing for the player draft. Computer software and statistical services are a major growth industry.

In the twelve team league that I belong to the draft was a five hour ordeal of cigarette smoke, toilet humor, dreadful puns, junk food, beer, cigars, and even one laptop computer. Everyone, it seems, looks for that winning edge.

There is a strange comradery to this association built on statistics, which is related to real baseball in the same way as bull fighting is to agriculture. It changes forever the way in which you watch a game. Players become much more important than teams, individual hitting achievements, ERA's, and strikeouts, transcend the significance of wins, losses, or pennant races. Any resemblance to baseball living or dead is purely coincidental.

For all those who lament the greed of players who seem willing to forsake any aspect of the game for money or fame, or for those who denounce the owners for having lost all sense of tradition, for those who condemn both their houses for destroying the sacred rituals of baseball, it may be time to look in the mirror. The enemy might just be there.

Fantasy Baseball Freaks may be just as guilty of disfiguring the game as the DH, astro turf, domed stadiums, night world series games, the peddling of autographs and collectables, owners or players, and soon the Fox Network. Even David Okrent, the Doubleday of Duplicity, who invented Rotissere Baseball as an adult beyond the age of reason, is having second thoughts about the monster he created. For him the law of unintended consequences must have special meaning these days.

And so during these opening weeks of the season, the hope is already full of shadows, and maybe it is time for everyone to repent. But first you may want to try to find a power-hitting first-baseman to strengthen the home run category, look for a middle reliever to bolster strike-outs, and take one last look at the DL, just in case.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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